

University of Wollongong Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -
Papers

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

2003

From The Golden Courtesan

Shady Cosgrove

University of Wollongong, shady@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cosgrove, Shady, "From The Golden Courtesan" (2003). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 1474.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/1474>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

From The Golden Courtesan

Abstract

This is an excerpt from the sixth chapter of Shady Cosgrove's *The Golden Courtesan*. Set in the 1830s, the novel responds to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* in a Rhysian tradition by exploring the life of Edward Rochester's mistress, Celine Varens. Celine was an opera dancer/courtesan and mother to Adele Varens (the child who inspired Jane's arrival at Thornfield). In this excerpt, Celine and Rochester have been engaged in a turbulent affair and Demi, a rival dancer, has just told Celine of Rochester's wife, Bertha/Antoinette. Celine is also pregnant with Rochester's child.

Keywords

courtesan, golden

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Cosgrove, S. E. "From The Golden Courtesan." *Antipodes: a North American journal of Australian literature* 17 .2 (2003): 134-138.

from *The Golden Courtesan*

by SHADY COSGROVE

This is an excerpt from the sixth chapter of Shady Cosgrove's *The Golden Courtesan*. Set in the 1830s, the novel responds to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in a Rhysian tradition by exploring the life of Edward Rochester's mistress, Céline Varens. Céline was an opera dancer/courtesan and mother to Adele Varens (the child who inspired Jane's arrival at Thornfield). In this excerpt, Céline and Rochester have been engaged in a turbulent affair and Demi, a rival dancer, has just told Céline of Rochester's wife, Bertha/Antoinette. Céline is also pregnant with Rochester's child.

Céline Varens, December 1833 through July 1834

I saw Demi to the door. We stood, appraising each other; her eyes were the colour of the walnut shells I remembered cracking as a child. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but thought better of it, and turned abruptly, walking down the front steps of my hotel. Her pale hands reached for her hair and then her skirt, smoothing them into place. She retreated with quick steps that didn't convey the strange victory she had just achieved. I watched until she rounded the corner.

Upon closing the front door, I retired to my dressing room. Combing my hair with a silver-handled brush, I tried to relax into the repetition of the strokes, but was too distracted. My reflection looked pale; my cheeks needed rouge. I looked through my vanity drawers for the right shade and then applied too much. Cursing and wiping my face, I practised smiling in the hope it would detract from the hollows beneath my eyes. With a final glance at the mirror, I went to the coat closet and readied myself with a heavy woollen jacket.

It was a windy day. The trees swayed and tilted with the gusts as if they were little more than twigs. The road was littered with garbage; I held my fingers against my nose to block the stench. It was only three in the afternoon, but the sky was dark with clouds as if the evening had paid an early visit without apology for its inconvenient arrival. I started towards Rochester's hotel.

I saw him first. He was walking in my direction with his back hunched as if it were raining and he wanted to keep dry. His hat was tilted and one shoulder rested slightly higher than the other. He wore a black cloak with a gold chain linking it together at the neck. I stopped in front of a doorway and appreciated Rochester's determined pace. Despite the fact he was walking towards me, it seemed each step he took increased the distance between us as if we were part of an optical illusion.

I watched a beggar woman near him. Her back was arched into a hump below her neck and she wore a red kerchief around her neck. I chastised her in my head for approaching him; he wasn't kind to beggars. She stepped forward into his path. To my surprise, he paused and met her eye. Without hesitation, he reached into his pocket and gave her a few coins. She bowed to him and moved away.

He came closer. His face was tired, but his eyes were awake, alive. He still hadn't seen me. I counted his steps. One. Two. Three. Four. On four he looked up, into my eyes, and his face turned into a smile that matched the intensity of his eyes.

"Céline Varens! What a surprise. I was just coming to see you."

"And I you."

"Shall we stop and have a drink? I am feeling celebratory. Everything has been signed. The West Indies estate is another man's domain and I am a wealthy man."

I suddenly felt sick. Bile surged upwards from my stomach. My jaw shuddered with the unwelcome sour taste of my revisiting lunch. I swallowed quickly, but Rochester noticed the expression on my face.

"Céline, are you unwell?"

It was an opening to tell him of the child. The pause beckoned me, but I couldn't look at him. Finally I mumbled, "No, no. I'm fine."

He held a leather-gloved hand in front of him and surveyed it. "My lawyer thinks I'm mad with sugar values increasing. Rum, too. But the land, I am convinced, will only drop in value. Who would invest in a place rippled by the madness of emancipation?"

Rochester's strides were even and quick. He spoke with volume, as if announcing his newfound liberation to the shop fronts closing early. I felt another surge. Moving quickly down an alley, I vomited again. This time pain buckled me over and I threw my head towards the gutter. Liquid cheese and red wine came rushing out of my mouth as if I were an animal let loose on the streets of a city. I looked up the narrow lane; it was empty, thank God. I hung there, in balance, over the side of the street when I felt Rochester's hand on my back.

"Céline, are you all right?" his voice was forceful with worry.

"I know about your wife and I am carrying your child." I mentioned the wife first; the child seemed quite recent compared to the little nugget he'd been keeping from me.

"You obviously need a doctor. Do you feel feverish?" he asked, handing me his handkerchief.

I said it again, this time louder, pinching myself. I spoke to the building in front of me. The stones of the wall took up my entire vision. They were laid against one another with such care that the proportions were exact and even. When I spoke, I made sure my voice would carry so every piece of sandstone could hear me.

"I know about your wife and I am carrying your child."

I didn't look up, but I could feel his gaze watching as I held my skirts away from the puddle before me. I declared the words as if the sheer force of my momentum could carry us away from their meaning.

"I see," he said.

I wiped my face and pocketed his handkerchief.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"About which one?"

"The baby."

I didn't want to talk about the baby; I wanted to talk about the wife. "Yes. I am certainly with child and it is certainly yours. And you, are you certainly married?"

I stood up and turned around. I looked up at him, willing him to prove Demi wrong. His face was trembling and he clutched his hands into one another as if he were looking for something to hold. Despite the cold, I could hear pigeons cooing above us.

"Oh my Céline. It is not what it seems," his voice was high, unfamiliar.

He pulled me up and held my wrists for a moment before speaking.

"Are you well enough to walk?"

I nodded.

He bit his lip thoughtfully as if assessing my state.

"I'll be fine."

"Then we must get away from here, this street, this block I have strolled so many times. We cannot sit to your boudoir or your sitting room or even my bedroom. Let us go, but only on streets we have never taken. We will see where they lead," he said.

I drew a deep breath. The cold air awakened my lungs, clearing my head, and I felt better; the nausea had passed. We turned onto little alleyways and followed them like mazes. We lost track of direction and followed our hunches at intersections. Overhead, living quarters offered bare roofs and patios. Someone had forgotten a pair of trousers and they would freeze to the line. We walked as if exploring a foreign city.

In retrospect, I decided he was superstitious. Every place we knew had failed us if it led to the conversation we were sharing. He wanted our feet to find another path through that city. At the time, I didn't understand. I was distracted.

We moved slowly up Montmartre. The stairs were steep and I paused a few times to catch my breath, cementing my appreciation for the hill that sits over Paris like a guardian. The staircases etched into it weren't straight. They were crafted for footing, so it could be scaled without difficulty, but the angle was still sharp. I had often watched the hill from a distance, the people ascending like ants. There was only one winding path I had never ventured on before. We climbed it in silence. I could hear Rochester breathing beside me.

"Céline. I am married, but not to a woman. She is a cunning animal that has taken the form of one with her tricks of obeah, but she is not a woman. You must believe me." His voice was pleading.

"I don't know what I believe." I felt stubborn, childish. I kicked a stone in my path. It ricocheted against the step and fell behind me.

"Certainly you don't think she means anything to me if I have forsaken my manor to be in Paris with you?" The persistence in his voice was soothing like warm tea, oversweetened with cane sugar.

I turned to him. "Is it good that she matters nothing to you?"

"You have my heart." He spoke simply as if the misunderstanding were on my part and he were ready for the matter to be dismissed.

"But she has your body. She is your wife. You have been sworn to her in the presence of God." I laughed then, surprised by my bitter tone. "I believed you might consider marrying me. I thought you might be crazy enough to contemplate sharing your name. You let me believe you could be the fool."

Rochester reacted to the loud anger of my words with a seething whispered vehemence. "I never counted your failings in secret conversation. You will never discover a letter written in my hand."

"But Marie-Thérèse." He looked up at that as though he had forgotten about her entirely. My stomach groaned.

I looked to the city below and the steep hill. I was surprised people could build houses that stayed put without falling towards the river's gravity. The downward slope was sprinkled with lanterns resilient against the descending night. Nearby, I watched one flicker through its glass shell. The smell of oil layered with that of oncoming snow; I was ready for a baptism from above.

His tone shifted, his voice hard. "How did you find out about this?"

Demi and her red hair seemed far away from that staircase cradled between the earth and the heavens. I looked out again at the lights below, brighter than the stars as if a strange inversion had changed city for sky.

Rochester grabbed my arm. I felt tired and cold.

"How did you find out?" he asked.

"What does it matter how I found out?"

"Have you been spying on my affairs?"

It didn't matter where we went. We were the common denominator, ruining ourselves whatever the landscape. I looked upwards, but there was only a haze of dark clouds.

He repeated his question. "Have you been spying on me?"

I didn't say anything. I remembered Demi's retreating figure as she left my house, her strange hurried steps as if she were frightened of the dark magic she had set into motion.

He tried again. "Did someone tell you?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

I pulled my scarf closer around my neck. I could feel the air; I wished that it were snowing already.

"Demi."

"Demi," he repeated.

We emerged then onto a courtyard with the church and view that first taught me places can have souls. Below, a man cleared the street with his shovel and wagon, erasing evidence of the city's horses. His work would be hindered by the weather, I thought. Without

stopping, we left the staircase and walked to the right. We passed a bridge and I wondered briefly if we should turn, but Rochester continued ahead. He kept talking.

"My wife," he spoke the second word with unnecessary emphasis. "Bertha Rochester, is a madwoman. I was tricked into marriage by my own father. Her stepfather was just as conniving, her mother irrational and her brother simple, though he died in a fire before I ever set foot in the West Indies," he said.

His voice had risen. He spoke like a preacher with a congregation he had to convince. My damnation would rest on his conscience if I didn't succumb.

"Be that as it may. She is still your wife."

"I am bound to a hyena that climbs the walls and spits in my face."

"And now, sir, with this child in my belly, I am bound to you," I said.

He was quiet. We had covered a fair distance. With the stairs behind us, I had lost track of where we were.

"It is your child Edward Rochester."

He carried on as if I had said nothing. "My wife, as you call her, my wife." He opened his mouth and I was surprised by the withering laugh that emerged. "She is a curse, not a wife, with a soul darker than the night and a temperament for zookeepers."

"Where does she live?"

"Thornfield. She has her own quarters."

"In the attic?"

His eyebrows shifted in surprise; Demi had researched well. "Yes."

"You do not attend to her?"

"Of course not. She throws things at me. She punches my face and tears at my hair."

Snow had begun to fall, its crisp fresh smell layering over the chimney smoke and dank city air. My feet were cold.

"Céline, she is looked after. I feed and clothe her. She has her own living quarters. She is quite comfortable, in fact."

I thought of Marie-Thérèse, her wide eyes crumpling as she realized Rochester was still gracing my bed. We all were locked away in his cupboards, stowed in safety. I felt ill again. He was still talking.

Bertha, he called her. Bertha wasn't a Créole name. It was hard to picture the woman he described with those two syllables, one hard, the other soft. He told me she was beautiful beyond belief. When he first laid eyes on her he was reminded of doves and peaches. The West Indies had hypnotized him, but he thought it was her: the way she stayed in bed all morning; her white dressing robes; the rum and the food. He believed she had affected his vision, suddenly all the colors were fierce

and strong, but no, it was the climate, the weather, the humidity. He wasn't preaching now, but pleading, as if I might change my mind and we could forget his oversight.

I looked at him in disbelief and moved towards a ditch; again I threw up.

Pains had begun to rattle my gut and I felt hot chills on my forehead. "I need a doctor, Rochester," I said.

"What?"

"This discussion will have to wait. I'm not well."

He looked around, but the street signs offered no orientation. The snow was falling steadily; any familiarity to the buildings was hiding beneath a thin layer of white dust.

He stopped a taxi coach and we climbed in. I held my stomach with both hands as Rochester recited instructions to the driver. Leaning my head against the carriage wall, I heard a sharp whistle and we started off. I could feel a fever digging its heels into my temples. My head felt clammy; my body was sweating. I was alarmed at our speed. I called for the driver to reduce pace.

"Now, now, Céline. We'll be home soon," Rochester said.

"But we are going too fast," I was breathing hard. Panic and frenzy filled the air inside the carriage.

"Céline, be still now." He gripped my arms and held me tight. I tried wriggling out of his grasp. I needed to warn the driver.

"Stop moving." His jaw enunciated carefully and the words repeated themselves. I watched his mouth, the bottom edges of his front teeth were not smooth, but jagged. I felt dizzy.

The next thing I remember was Rochester's hands undressing my body and helping me into bed. They had an icy heat to them that made me shiver; my skin felt brittle. I fell asleep immediately and though the doctor came and prescribed a medicine, I didn't remember speaking with him.

In my dreams that night, I saw Rochester's painting of the boat. It was propelled by a tidal rush that filled my room, carrying me away. The water was dark and unbearably cold. The fury behind the waves frightened me more than my lack of breath. My heart would occasionally break surface, gasping for air as if it fed my lungs. I wondered where the vessel was, if I could find it and climb aboard. In the rush of my senses, I saw the silver mirror Rochester had broken. I tried to grasp it, but it was out of reach, carried away.

The doctor came the next morning and said I needed rest. He gave me a mixture to take three times a day and seemed confident of the baby's well being despite my illness.

I thought again of going to Italy. Rochester would not support me if I left, but he might not provide for me if I stayed either. Leaving would be profitable for my dance career. I didn't want a belly in Paris, women appraising me, their eyes resting on my stomach. I could return with a child, and people would put two and two together, but there is something different between surmising a situation and seeing it before you.

Rochester came over that evening. He entered my boudoir with the surefooted steps of a lawyer entering a courtroom. I sat up.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better, though my strength has not entirely returned."

"Cerise visited earlier when you were asleep."

"Did she? Am I missing rehearsals?"

"Only one. The others were cancelled because of the chorus again."

We were quiet then, but Rochester couldn't stand still. He paced along the side of my bed, turned ninety degrees, walked along its end, and then returned so he was standing before me again. He did this a few times.

"Rochester, what is it?"

He didn't stop moving, and when he spoke it was to the bedstead. "How do I know it is mine?"

"It is yours," I said, mimicking his accent, the cold vowels.

"Why have you done this to me?" English can be a harsh, staccatoed language, I thought. His scowl deepened; I didn't have the strength to rise up. I searched for the right words.

"It was an accident."

"It wasn't an accident. You've done this on purpose. You've masterminded this to keep me, cage me. You are——"

He didn't finish his sentence. His fists punched down onto the mattress and though they didn't strike me, I was surprised by their sudden violence. I felt queasy. I could feel my fever returning.

"No, I certainly didn't plan this."

"Oh didn't you? Didn't you? You couldn't offer an estate so you——"

"No. No." I was burning in a dream; I couldn't wake up.

"Then absolve us. There are midwives who——" he strode to the foot of my bed again.

"And die?" My voice shook.

He stopped and looked up sharply. "Don't be stupid."

"The likelihood——" I began.

"——the possibility," he interrupted.

I held onto my quilt with both hands clenched. "I won't hang for your passions."

"Why are you doing this?"

I didn't say anything. He walked back. Standing beside me, he leaned over my face, his breath as foul as his inflection: "Why are you doing this?"

I sighed. Watching the knot in his plum silk scarf, I admitted quietly: "I believe it's God's will I have your child."

He laughed with the pleasure of a royal enchanted by a jester: "What lovely irony, a whore preaching of God's will."

Had I the strength, I would have wrung his neck with the same assurance the laundress used with my dresses. My fists tightened around the coverlet.

His voice was acerbic: "It is not mine. I know, Céline, that it is not mine,"

He looked around the room as if searching for my mirror, something to break that would rupture me entirely. His anger was a rhythm, the hollow pounding of a palm against stretched hide. Gaining momentum, the tempo crept up on itself. I watched his hands. His fingers curled and opened before striking the wall. Combing over my room, his fists stopped above my dressing table and I held my breath. With one move, he cleared the top, sweeping everything to the floor. Glass bottles. Make-up containers. A white handkerchief bound tightly. My silver hairbrush. Then, as if time had slowed, he opened the drawers and emptied them on top of the mess. He was looking for something; some piece of proof called to him in a tone only dogs could register. He threw the drawers down and kicked them, breaking their sides. The contents of my dressing table were destroyed. I couldn't move.

I stayed there, staring at the mess before me and then reached to cover my ears. My voice echoed against my hands, spilling into my head.

"I'm going to Venice," I said.

"What?"

"I'm going to Venice."

He laughed and I thought he never seemed so ugly.

"And what will you do there?" he sneered.

I didn't answer him. But once I spoke, it became true. Even though I was confined to a language not my own, I had released a lexical magic; words offer their own alchemy.

"I'm going to Venice."

It was a prayer and an intent bound together in six syllables.

"I'm waiting until the show is over and then I'm leaving." He looked at me and laughed.

"You're crazy," he said.

"Perhaps."

Rochester sat down on the bed, suddenly careful. He took my hand from the quilt and brought it to his lips. Taking my first finger into his mouth, he gently pulled on it with his teeth, nursing it. Then, the second. Shifting me by the shoulders, he made space on the mattress and lay down. Pausing only a moment, he rolled on top of me; I could feel him below, through the blanket. As if conspiring with each other, his hands pulled the covers away and his mouth moved from my neck to my chest. Sitting up, he raised my nightdress. Where my skin was exposed, I could feel the cold of the room seeping in. He continued to kiss me, moving lower, but he was too hot; it hurt where his lips pressed. He traced the cross tattoo with his fingers and then bit it tenderly. I felt shards of glass in my skin and wondered if they were cutting his lips.

When he entered me, I thought of attics and cold English winters, lust and dowries.

He came quickly, quicker than usual. Afterwards I lay there, my nausea returning; I focused on one sentence as if it were a *Hail Mary*, repeating it again and again. I said it under my breath, articulating each word, feeling my lips move around their syllables: "I'm going to Venice."

American-born SHADY COSGROVE has lived in Australia for nine years, settling permanently in the Illawarra. She has worked as a journalist for the Sydney Morning Herald and currently lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. This year, she received her doctorate from the Australian National University; her thesis examined structuralist and post-structuralist theories of character. Awaiting publication, The Golden Courtesan is her first novel.